

Pentagon Voids On-Site Policing For ABM Pact

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In an effort to lure the Russians into talks about limiting costly anti-ballistic missile systems, the Pentagon has quietly dropped demands for on-site inspection to police any such arms pact.

Policy-making officials say that President Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara have told the Soviet leadership that the first mutual reductions in ABM's could be made without either formal agreement or any kind of international inspection system.

These officials argue that American "detection devices"—space satellites and high-flying reconnaissance planes—are now efficient enough to verify any "informal" agreement. In essence the same "unilateral verification" used in the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty would be applied to the ABM's.

So far the Russians have not responded. They have said they will talk about both offensive and defensive missile systems, but have refused to set a date. The conviction in official quarters is that they are deliberately leaving the door open.

Machinery Lack Suspected

Experts believe that the Soviet hierarchy is neither politically nor technically equipped to make a quick decision. The military and Communist party leadership is too tightly fitted into separate compartments to take the broad sophisticated approach of the McNamara "whiz kids" to arms control in the nuclear age.

But the prediction here is that once the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Bolshevik revolution are over in November, the Russians will make their move on the ABM's. And the McNamara strategy is to make it as easy as possible for them by avoiding initial and unnecessary embarrassments about demands for on-site inspection and a sweeping arms control pact with the United States.

"It is an act of political courage these days for the Russians even to sit down and talk with us," said one American official, "given their formal attitude toward the Vietnam war and the charges their rebellious Chinese cousins hurl at them."

The first public tip-off to the new American approach came in a little-noted passage of a speech three weeks ago by Paul C. Warnke, assistant secretary of defense, head of the powerful office of International Security Affairs in the Pentagon.

The bulk of the speech explained how McNamara's decision to build the so-called "thin" ABM system was directed against the Chinese, not the Russians.

But at the end Warnke turned to the hope that "by parallel actions, or by formal agreement" the Soviet Union and the United States can limit their strategic offensive and defensive forces.

"Moreover," he continued, should talks with the Russians occur, "we hope to avoid bogging down in the perennially difficult issue of international inspection."

"In considering any possible agreement with the Soviet Union to level off or reduce strategic offensive and defensive systems, or even the possibility for parallel action on the part of the two countries, we may have to depend on our own unilateral capability for verification."

Policy Shift Confirmed

American officials confirm that these passages mark a departure from traditional policy on the need for inspecting arms agreements.

They explain that in the case of the ABMs it is quite possible for the United States—and presumably also the Soviet Union—to tell from aerial reconnaissance when a site has been bulldozed over. According to these sources, it is virtually impossible for either side to fool the other.

These officials hastily add that relaxation of the demand for on-site policing of any ABM agreement does not carry over to other disarmament measures. Warnke himself said that "far-reaching agreements, particularly any involving substantial reductions" of offensive missiles, would require agreed international inspection.

But the overwhelming consensus here is that such agreements lie too far in the future to deserve detailed study. The more going on the most limited steps possible.